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MM 93-48

July 14, 1994

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

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The Honorable Reed Hundt
Chairman of the Federal Communications Comm.,
Washington DC

Dear Honorable Reed Hundt :

As a mother and grandmother, I am very much concerned for the educational needs of our children! They are our future leaders!

The guidelines for the enforcement of the Children's Television Act of 1994 need to be strengthened! We need more educational and informational programs for our children -

These educational programs need to be scheduled at appropriate times for children to watch.

A family program which aired several times last spring, and I understand will be on again this fall is the program "Christy" based on Catherine Marshall's novel -

This is excellent, clean cut, family entertainment!

I look forward to the day when children's programming on commercial TV will be educational, too, and not only entertainment -

A limit should be put on the amount of advertising that can be aired during the children's TV programs -

Thank you for your consideration!

Lain Oscarson
6967 174 Ave SE
Wadsworth ND 58075

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June 14, 1993

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FCC

Mass Media Bureau, Enforcement Division
Complaints Branch
1919 M Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

JUN 25 11 15 AM '93

VIDEO RECORDS
DIVISION

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Dear Madam:

We, the public, believe that it is time for your commission to take action and place some restrictions on the TV network industry. The network industry's flagrant abuse of children's rights is shown in the neglect of quality educational programming and quality entertainment programs for children.

Since children do not have lobbyists, their interests must be protected by others. Nothing is being done currently by the networks to stimulate the educational or even entertainment needs of America's children.

TV is ubiquitous. It will always be there, and in this respect it needs to serve the interests of the public. We urge you to reflect this interest by placing regulations on the network industry to keep the airwaves safe, educational and entertaining for the children of America.

Sincerely,

E. Keller

Elizabeth & Jim Kelley
3252 Goldsmith Street
San Diego, CA 92106

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OFFICE OF SECRETARY

24692 Woodacre Ave.
Hayward, CA 94544
April 1, 1995

Mr. Reed E. Hundt,
Chair, FCC

Dear Mr. Hundt:

I think that the FCC's proposal for mandatory five hours per week of educational programming on TV is a very good idea; however, I wonder how the Commission intends to enforce this rule.

You will recall that some years ago the Commission, along with Congress, tried to roll back what cable companies charge. Consumers applauded this. Nevertheless, cable companies have found ways to get around this legislation. For example, my local cable company, TCI Cablevision of Hayward, has raised its fees about four times since then. I now pay over twice as much as I did pre-legislative days.

When I complained to the FCC, I received such a complicated form that I gave up returning it. My local congressman has also tried to get the company to reduce its rates; but he has had no luck either.

Sincerely yours,



Ernest A. Avellar

cc. Congressman Pete Stark

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Kids TV

Oprah and Phil are not teachers

He & Jenny Jones are
of The worst shows
Roseanne is Repulsive
Where
are The morals Today?

Some TV stations call Donahue and He-Man educational television. We call that nonsense. So do parents and other children's advocates who want the Federal Communications Commission to put some teeth in a 1990 law intended to improve TV for children. Over the next few weeks, FCC commissioners will decide.

Congress passed the Children's Television Act in 1990 to bring young viewers a few more choices than reruns of *The Jetsons*. It requires commercial TV stations to increase educational programming for kids in order to renew their licenses. But the rules are weak and full of loopholes.

So TV gave us more junk-food viewing pawned off as educational TV. *Enquirer* TV reporter John Kiesewetter reviewed reports from Cincinnati's five commercial stations last year, and found they labeled as "educational" cartoons, sitcoms and talk shows like *Oprah* and *Donahue*.

Education and child advocacy groups are urging the FCC to strengthen its rules. But the broadcasters say that quality programs are too costly and unpopular.

"What they fail to mention," said Kathryn Montgomery, president of the non-profit Center for Media Education, "is that broadcast revenues are higher this year than ever before and a big chunk of that money is being made off of children."

Witness this year's Christmas-toy phenomenon, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, based on the TV series.

Broadcasters should voluntarily comply. But their record with children

Time to get involved

Let Federal Communications Commissioners know your opinion on strengthening the rules of the Children's Television Act. They're expected to decide by Jan. 12.

Contact FCC Chairman Reed Hundt, 1919 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20554; phone 202-418-1000 or fax 202-418-2801.

does not inspire trust. It was further undermined during congressional hearings this year when industry bosses promised, with a wink, to voluntarily reduce violence.

Children's advocacy groups have several specific proposals to improve educational TV. They would require a minimum of one hour of children's programming a day and clarify the definition of "educational" content.

Nobody dislikes meddlesome regulators more than we do. But an FCC license is a privilege that implies some responsibility. The rules don't ask much. There are obvious links between violence on TV and violent behavior, between illiteracy and TV watching. TV is a powerful teacher, for good or bad.

Broadcasters make monster profits from public airwaves. The FCC should make sure they show some respect for the public good — especially children. Citizens should tell the FCC this is no time to lower Bedrock-bottom

MM 93-48

MRS. K. E. HATER
501 JULMAR DR.
CINCINNATI OH 45238

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Jeanne Hater
5361 Julmar Dr.
Cincinnati OH 45238

OPRAH has
a good show
now. She
changed her
format.

fce

Colorado Association For
Family & Community Education

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January 4, 1995

Federal Communications Commission
Mass Media Bureau
Enforcement Division
Complaints and Investigation Branch
1919 M. St. N. W.
Washington, DC - 20554

Dear Sirs,

I Am Writing in regard to the Children's And Television Act. I Am ashamed to think we have a regulation committee to monitor our programs, and the programs we are now getting at prime time, Children time, stinks!!! TV is a baby sitter for many young people - 6 mo - 39 years - Please lets start to influence our young people in the right way, that includes the Cartoons. I beg you to think about what is being aired today.

Last weekend our family watched football as a unit, was enjoying the game until one announcer told about this wonderful player being such as STUD. Now that comment is only a simply example of what our young people are hearing and seeing.



Thank you,
Patricia L. Leonard
33039 Rd S. Karul, Co 80823-9306

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Colorado Association For
Family & Community Education

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Federal Communications Commission
1919 M. St. N.W.,
Washington, D.C. 20554

1-5-94

Dear Sir:

I am concerned about the children's
Television act.

Television plays such an important
role in our children's lives. There is
so much "Violence" + "Sex", so we
need guidelines for all of the programs.

as a member of the Family & Community
Education Clubs we have worked on this
as a state program.

a half hour per week of educational
television, as the F.C.C. is trying to
convince us, isn't enough.

Please look into this and see what
can be done.

Sincerely,
Edell Culberson
14030 Cnty. Rd. 28
Karnak, Co. 80823



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31 Woodland Ave.
Florence, KY - 41042
December 29, 1994

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FCC Chairman Reed Hunt
1919 M Street, NW,
Washington, D.C. - 20554

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

Dear Sir,

I am writing to express the
hope that the FCC Commissioners really
will strengthen the rules of the Children's
Television Act.

I have watched some of these
so-called children's educational programs
and they are no more than junk. ~~with~~
full of empty noise and violence -
at best, trivial.

Thank you for your attention

Yours sincerely

Margaret B. Chesser

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James Quello, Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M St.
Washington, DC 20554

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To Whom It May Concern:

Please strengthen the regulations on the
Childrens Television Act.

Sincerely,
Dolores Howell
506 Sandra
Irving, TX 75060

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Moss Haven Elementary School

Parent-Teacher Association

Richardson Independent School District
9202 Moss Farm Lane
Dallas, Texas 75243

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

Ms. Heidi Sweetnam
8409 Vista View Drive
Dallas, Texas 75243
May 24, 1993

Ms. Edythe Wise
Chief of Complaints and Investigations
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M. Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Ms. Wise :

We would like you to be aware of our concern that the commercial television stations in the Dallas area are not fully complying with the intent of the Children's Television Act of 1990 (CTA). The Act requires stations, as a condition of licensing, to broadcast shows that serve the "educational and informational needs of children." We urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to use its powers to encourage all Dallas stations to increase the number of quality educational programs aired for children.

Last year the Parent-Teacher Association at Moss Haven Elementary School in Dallas established a Television Committee with the intent of improving the quality of television watched by children in our school. The committee sent surveys to local commercial stations asking them to identify the programs on their September, 1992 schedule which, in their view, met "children's educational and informational needs." Eight stations responded to our survey.

We have several concerns after reviewing the responses to our survey. (1) We are surprised at the types of programs identified as educational or informational in nature. Several stations listed such programs as "Muppet Babies" and "Saved by the Bell." Good as these programs may be, they seem to be designed primarily for entertainment. (2) We are concerned about the time of day and frequency with which the educational programs are aired. Programs often are aired after 9:00 p.m., and/or only once a week or once a month. At one station, the only CTA programming for the entire week was one hour at noon on Sunday. (3) A couple of stations listed Public Service Announcements as a major portion of their efforts to comply with the CTA. Public Service Announcements are not programming. Overall, we concluded that there seems to be a lack of creative, informational and educational programming aired on a regular basis in the Dallas area.

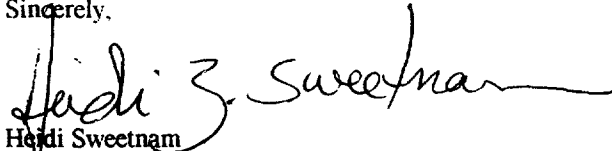
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Moss Haven Elementary School
Parent-Teacher Association
Richardson Independent School District
9202 Moss Farm Lane
Dallas, Texas 75243

The goals of the CTA are laudable. Our survey indicates that while local television stations are not in violation, they clearly are not striving to meet the standards of excellence encouraged by the CTA. We hope the FCC, during the license renewal process, will encourage our local stations to make significant improvements in their efforts to comply with the spirit of the CTA.

Sincerely,



Heidi Sweetnam

Chair, Moss Haven PTA Television Committee

cc: Carol Kent, PTA President of the Moss Haven Elementary School
Station Manager, Channel 4, KDFW, Dallas, Tx
Station Manager, Channel 5, KXAS, Dallas, Tx
Station Manager, Channel 8, WFAA, Dallas, Tx
General Manager, Channel 11, KYVT, Fort Worth, Tx
Station Manager, Channel 21, KXTA, Arlington, TX
Station Manager, Channel 27, KDFI, Dallas, Tx
General Manager, Channel 33, KDAF, Dallas, Tx

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Michael P. McCready
Attorney at Law

JUN 7 3 28 PM '93
400 Gates Avenue B-5
Norfolk, Virginia 23517

VIDEO SERVICE (W) (804) 622-5578
DIVISION (H) (804) 625-5098

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JAMES H. QUELLO

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

May 26, 1993

Hon. James Quello
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Sir:

I am writing to you concerning the current standard for childrens' educational programming. I urge you to tighten the FCC's interpretation of what constitutes "educational" programming.

I turned on network television on a Saturday morning for the first time in approximately ten years and was aghast at what I saw. The cartoons today are nothing more than extended commercials for childrens' products. Intrigued, I examined the TV Guide listings and concluded, from the titles alone I admit, that the programming was glaringly devoid of informative or instructional shows.

I am old enough to appreciate the decline in childrens' programming yet not too old so as to forget what it is like to be a child. Surely the creative persons who expend so much time and money developing what I have referred to as "extended commercials" could develop educational programs that would attract the attention of youngsters. I am encouraged, however, by the popularity of "Barney."

Being of the age where my wife and I will be starting a family in the next few years, I am dismayed at the present state of childrens' broadcasting. I only hope some improvement will come by the time I have children. Like it or not, television has an enormous impact on the development of children. Decisions involving such crucial constituents should not be treated cavalierly.

Sincerely,

Michael P. McCready

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

Mrs. Kemble Stout
NE 1115 Orchard Dr.
Pullman, WA 99163

May 30, 1993

Federal Communications Commission
Mass Media Bureau
1919 M St. N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20544

I support Representative Edward Markey's commitment to require television stations to comply with the Children's Television Act of 1990 or lose their licenses.

I knew about this only via Carl Jensen's America's Censored Newsletter, which is now defunct because of lack of support. Our country needs an act prohibiting ownership of media entities by corporations which profit from suppression of information. I'm speaking of General Electric, which owns A B C. It is not wise to allow an individual or a group to control which news the public gets. Take-overs and empire building have already combined almost all news outlets in a few companies' control. We had an anti-trust law, but it was one of the victims of the Reagan/Bush deregulation.

I intend to inform my senators and representative that I would like such a law.

I believe it is within your jurisdiction to require television networks and individual stations to reject material that lures teenagers and adults to violence and sexual promiscuity, and violates the mores of the community. So much immorality is shown in television and video cassettes, and so many children spend their time watching it unsupervised that is it no wonder we have dishonesty and violence growing to alarming proportions.

Sincerely,

Mildred Stout

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11493-48

**austin
montessori school**

5014 SUNSET TRAIL / AUSTIN, TEXAS 78745 / 512-892-0253
OFFICE

1610 WHELESS LANE, 400 WEST ALPINE ROAD, 6817 GREAT NORTHERN BLVD., PRIMARY LEVELS
2904 AND 2906 JONES ROAD, ELEMENTARY LEVELS

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DONNA BRYANT GOERTZ
FOUNDER
DONALD C. GOERTZ Ph.D
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

May 4, 1993

Chairman James Quello
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street
Washington, D.C. 20554

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

Dear Mr. Quello,

I am a parent volunteer on the Program Development Committee at Austin Montessori School in Austin, Texas. From our local paper we learned of your plans to require FCC-licensed broadcasting stations to provide a set number of EDUCATIONAL programs at times when children are most likely to be viewing. We at Austin Montessori School have very strong feelings about television programming for children and understand you are looking for suggestions from the public. Enclosed please find a packet of printed materials we have found helpful in advising our parents about television and children. Please review them and pass them to others who will be instrumental in decisions about educational programming for children. Thank you.

Janice Drake
Sincerely,

Janice L. Drake

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Excerpts from Endangered Minds, Why Our Children Don't Think, by Jane Healy, c 199 .

- . "80% of the books in this country are read by about 10% of the people...with a steady and significant decline in the number of book readers under twenty-one."
- . "Of a "typical" group of fifth graders,
 - 50% read 4 minutes a day or less
 - 30% read 2 minutes a day or less
 - 10% read nothing.This same group watched an average of 130 minutes of TV per day."
- . Book stores are supported primarily by people in their late thirties to mid-fifties.
- . Young people "have trouble with the mental organization and sustained effort demanded by reading. Coming to grips with verbal logic, wrestling one's mind into submission to an author's unfamiliar point of view, and struggling to make connections appear to be particularly taxing on today's young intellects."
-language physically builds the brain's higher-reasoning centers.
- . "If parents want their kids to do well in school or get into a good college, they have to start with language. A rich vocabulary is the foundation, but the ability to describe, compare, and categorize with language is what leads to our ability to think in analogy--that's the highest level and it's also what is tested on the SATs!"
- . "...overwhelming visual presence of television and video may be exacerbating the problem [with verbal precision] by neglecting left-hemisphere language areas."
- . "Slipping syntax leads to fuzzy thought. Difficulties using grammatical language to identify relationships between ideas may account for many of the problems in logical thinking, science, and math."
- . "...good written language is different from colloquial "talk written down." Awareness of its sound comes only from extensive listening to and/or reading quality prose and poetry. Moverover, expressing an idea on paper demands that the writer remove language from the here and now, gestures and "you know"'s just don't work!"
- . "The most difficult aspect of writing clearly...is that it demands the ability to organize thought." The verbal tools that clarify relationships in reading and writing do the same job in math.

- . "Grammatical speech and its understanding seem to be the aspects of language acquisition most vulnerable to deprivation...children must use language in an interactional setting to discover and learn the rules."
- . "Clearly, to be well prepared for reading, writing, listening, and speaking, children need to interact with increasingly advanced language during the years of childhood. But consider briefly the current situation:
 - . Busy schedules or uninterested caretakers militate against oral reading and thoughtful dinner-table conversation. Much of the "talk" that does take place, even in concerned families, may center around the mechanics of the moment (e.g., "Get your hat and mittens." "When does your shift at Burger King end tonight?" "Finish your homework or no TV.").
 - . The quality of language models in the media is highly variable. Even if the child chooses programs with more complex language, it may be of little use without an adult around to encourage verbal response.
 - . Most elementary-level children read textbooks that contain a thin, watered-down syntactic gruel.
 - . Time and motivation for reading are increasingly usurped by television and other nonliterary demands such as extra-curricular activities, computer practice, or drill-type homework."
- . "It's like, well, you know" does not fly on essay exams.

Tune In to Your Child with TV

It was one of those days. I was getting the flu, and although it was after six I was in no mood to start scraping carrots. Instead I took a mother's sick leave, threw two frozen entrées into the microwave and flopped on the sofa next to Daniel, my 8-year-old vidiot.

"What's on?" I asked groggily, noticing the inane laugh track.

Daniel responded with surprising animation for a child whose mind I assumed turned off as soon as the television set was turned on. "It's *Different Strokes*, my favorite show," he said. Then he launched into detailed explanations of the regular characters as they appeared on the screen. I hadn't heard so many continuous sentences from him since he'd recited his Cub Scout pledge of honor.

"What's the show about?" I asked, with mild interest.

"Well, see, Arnold—he's the little kid . . . I think he's smaller even than me—and that other kid's his friend. And that teenager is stealing his lunch every day. But Arnold already told his dad, and the principal said he'd stop the teenager, but he didn't—sort of like when you went to see my principal about that mean kid who was always pushing me around? Only he never stopped either."

Whoa! What was this? More than six months had passed since I had spoken to the principal about that bully, and I thought we'd gotten it all straightened out. And I was more than surprised at how easily Daniel related his experience to the situation on the TV show.

"So that kid's still bothering you?" I asked, hoping to sound casual. "Why haven't you told me?"

Daniel shrugged. "Well, you already went to the principal, and I figured there wasn't anything anyone could



Youngsters long to talk about their favorite programs. Watch right along with them, listen to their comments and you can clue in to what is really on their minds. Sometimes it may be the only way they can tell you.

BY CAROL KIRSCHENBAUM

do," he replied, turning his attention back to the show.

The next day I called Daniel's teacher and the other boy's mother. Together we devised a relatively simple plan to prevent our kids from playing bully and victim.

Children have lives of their own, and most of the time we parents are left wondering what in the world they're thinking, what is really going on during the hours away from home. By listening to an offhand remark my child made while watching TV, I got a clue.

"This is just what we're trying to tell more parents," comments Peggy Charren, president of Action for Children's Television (ACT). "Occasional TV watching with your kids can help you

understand them better." Although ACT would like to see children's TV viewing whittled from the average four and a half hours a day to just two, Charren and a vast number of psychologists and media experts think that television programs—even those on ordinary network TV—can be used quite wisely.

Wise viewing means being selective—watching television programs instead of just whatever's on; watching television with your child, whenever possible; and, most importantly, discussing what you see.

"I can't stress enough the importance of discussing television with your child," insists Dr. Dorothy Singer, co-director of the Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center. Television can be a valuable tool in learning more about your child and in reinforcing your own family's values, she contends, but it can also be a passive, isolating experience for children. "It all depends on what you as a parent put into it," she states.

Among the most popular TV shows these days are those that are considered family fare—situation comedies such as *Family Ties*, *Kate and Allie*, *Webster*, *Together We Stand*, *Valerie* and the highly rated favorite *The Cosby Show*. Not coincidentally, these shows feature children, and they are heavily issue oriented by design.

"These shows are ideal springboards for parents to use in discussing social and moral issues that affect them and their children, and to find out just how the kids are feeling," contends Dr. Nicholas Van Dyck, founder of the National Council on Families and Television. "The opportunity for substantive family discussions kicked off by television exists. Now it's a matter of convincing

(continued on page 68)

JILL LEVINE

arents that watching TV doesn't have to mean being a couch potato."

Research shows that children respond favorably to discussions with their parents based on TV shows and characters, even while the show is on. In a study conducted by Dr. Paul Messaris of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, not one of the 300 mothers complained that her child wanted her to keep quiet during a television show. "Children seem to crave this interaction with parents," says Dr. Messaris. The longest, most complex moral discussions tended to take place when a child initiated it by asking a small question or making a comment.

However, many parents tend to ignore the seemingly insignificant questions children raise during a program—questions that can, according to experts, lead to fruitful discussions about sensitive, personal topics, such as sexuality, drugs, friendship, problems at school and authority.

"We're not telling parents to say, 'Sit down. It's time to discuss this television show,'" says Dr. Van Dyck. Just make graceful use of a golden opportunity, is his recommendation. "Then, if a real problem should surface, you're better

equipped as a family to deal with it."

These are some techniques that may get the ball rolling:

- Find out which shows your child is watching, advises Dr. Singer, and then watch those programs with her or him when you're free to do so. Be nonjudgmental, even if you feel like throwing something at the set. Start where your child is and add dimension and understanding to your viewing together.

The shows that have the most impact on grade-school children are those that they watch daily, according to the University of Pennsylvania study. "The richest and longest discussions between mothers and children were kicked off by daily reruns of *The Brady Bunch*, the family-oriented sitcom which was on late afternoons at the time of our study," notes Dr. Messaris.

- Select in advance some programs that appeal to both you and your children. "Sitcoms are written with families in mind," says Peggy Charren, "and they're usually the best for generating discussions." Check your local TV listings to see which issues a particular show will address that week. Some might not be suitable for preteenagers.

- Some psychologists strongly recommend that children not be allowed to

watch TV alone in their rooms—although 50 percent of American homes now have more than one television set. "Solitary viewing encourages social isolation and doesn't benefit anyone," states Dr. Van Dyck.

- Pick up on your child's nonverbal cues while watching television. "If a child seems upset or nervous while watching a sitcom, it doesn't mean that you should rush over and change the channel," says Dr. Douglas Keene, a psychologist with the Austin Mental Health Associates in Texas. But it can mean that the issue being aired is one your child is sensitive to.

- Pick up on verbal cues, such as a child saying, "Why did that happen?" or "I hate that," or just "Huh?" If a child says, "Things aren't real on TV," he may be exercising his perception of reality versus fantasy.

"Parents are invaluable as mediators," states Dr. Ellen Wartella, associate professor of communications at the University of Illinois. "Children don't process information the same way adults do, and very often the message they get from a show is not at all what the producer intended."

Dr. Messaris tells about one mother in his study who was astonished that

the child automatically assumed the raggedly dressed man on the TV screen was the villain, which he wasn't. "In a discussion of the show she discovered that her child had a prejudice against poor people, and she was then able to address his misconceptions and reinforce the values of their own family."

- Ask questions. At first keep them focused on the show. For instance, ask your child, "What do you think she should do now?" Or, "Do you think that character did the right thing?" A child is less apt to feel intruded upon when questions are phrased in terms of a character, says Dr. Keene.

- Gradually address your own child's experience. For example, "How would you have handled that situation?" Probe gently and focus on feeling questions: "How do you think that character feels?" "Have you ever felt like that?" Don't try to pry responses from your child; if she or he is not interested in talking, let it go, advises Dr. Keene.

Sometimes the closeness you'll find with your child results in simply reassuring him that others feel the way he does. My friend Barbara, who has two sons, ages 9 and 11, notes that an episode of *The Golden Girls* dealing with sibling rivalry—a big topic at her

house—helped cool tensions. "The kids were able to laugh at themselves while laughing at these older women fighting just the way they do," she comments with a smile. "Our family is so busy, it's hard to keep up with each other. Television characters we all know provide a common point of reference."

It's OK if your discussions take place in the car, while preparing dinner, before tucking the kids in for the night or during a commercial. The point is to talk about what's meaningful to your children and, ultimately, to you.

"I don't think that even the best TV time substitutes for other quality time with kids," Dr. Keene cautions parents. "I would hope families still do other things together, such as going to the park or a museum or discussing what books they're reading. But since kids are going to watch a certain amount of TV anyway, why not make that quality time too?"

That's what it has become at our house. Ever since our first experience with *Diff'rent Strokes*, Daniel and I have been watching a few midweek sitcoms together on a regular basis, as a treat after he's done his homework. We sit in our "TV position"—choo-choo style on the sofa—and we talk, with Daniel commenting freely on every-

thing, from a kid in his class who's a "nerd," to being too skinny, to the fact that everyone on TV is rich and we're not. Sometimes the topics are serious, like the episode on *Diff'rent Strokes* about a child molester, or the one about an alcoholic youngster. Sometimes Daniel makes comparisons and observations, such as telling me that I remind him of Allie because I'm a chocolate fanatic, or wishing aloud that he had a grandmother like Betty White on *The Golden Girls*, because she's so cheerful. Our discussions often let me know that Daniel's going through a hard time with friends, or that he's feeling proud of his brains. Our TV-prompted talks may be informational, like the one inspired by an episode of *Family Ties* in which Alex played in a chess tournament against a student from the Soviet Union. Daniel encouraged me to haul out the globe and show him just where the Soviet Union is.

And many times, we simply enjoy the quiet reassurance of laughing together, sitting in our cuddly "TV position." "It's in the more relaxed, enjoyable moments of conversation that you are doing the most you can do as a parent," remarks Dr. Van Dyck. "You're communicating that you're there, that you care and that it's no big deal." WD

Excerpts from Endangered Minds, Why Our Children Don't Think, by Jane Healy, c 199 .

- . "80% of the books in this country are read by about 10% of the people...with a steady and significant decline in the number of book readers under twenty-one."
- . "Of a "typical" group of fifth graders,
 - 50% read 4 minutes a day or less
 - 30% read 2 minutes a day or less
 - 10% read nothing.This same group watched an average of 130 minutes of TV per day."
- . Book stores are supported primarily by people in their late thirties to mid-fifties.
- . Young people "have trouble with the mental organization and sustained effort demanded by reading. Coming to grips with verbal logic, wrestling one's mind into submission to an author's unfamiliar point of view, and struggling to make connections appear to be particularly taxing on today's young intellects."
- . "...language physically builds the brain's higher-reasoning centers."
- . "If parents want their kids to do well in school or get into a good college, they have to start with language. A rich vocabulary is the foundation, but the ability to describe, compare, and categorize with language is what leads to our ability to think in analogy--that's the highest level and it's also what is tested on the SATs!"
- . "...overwhelming visual presence of television and video may be exacerbating the problem [with verbal precision] by neglecting left-hemisphere language areas."
- . "Slipping syntax leads to fuzzy thought. Difficulties using grammatical language to identify relationships between ideas may account for many of the problems in logical thinking, science, and math."
- . "...good written language is different from colloquial "talk written down." Awareness of its sound comes only from extensive listening to and/or reading quality prose and poetry. Moreover, expressing an idea on paper demands that the writer remove language from the here and now, gestures and "you know"'s just don't work!"
- . "The most difficult aspect of writing clearly...is that it demands the ability to organize thought." The verbal tools that clarify relationships in reading and writing do the same job in math.

- . "Grammatical speech and its understanding seem to be the aspects of language acquisition most vulnerable to deprivation...children must use language in an interactional setting to discover and learn the rules."
- . "Clearly, to be well prepared for reading, writing, listening, and speaking, children need to interact with increasingly advanced language during the years of childhood. But consider briefly the current situation:
 - . Busy schedules or uninterested caretakers militate against oral reading and thoughtful dinner-table conversation. Much of the "talk" that does take place, even in concerned families, may center around the mechanics of the moment (e.g., "Get your hat and mittens." "When does your shift at Burger King end tonight?" "Finish your homework or no TV.").
 - . The quality of language models in the media is highly variable. Even if the child chooses programs with more complex language, it may be of little use without an adult around to encourage verbal response.
 - . Most elementary-level children read textbooks that contain a thin, watered-down syntactic gruel.
 - . Time and motivation for reading are increasingly usurped by television and other nonliterary demands such as extra-curricular activities, computer practice, or drill-type homework."
- . "It's like, well, you know" does not fly on essay exams.



TV Savvy

Here's how to put the beast in its place—and keep it there.

By Vicki Lansky

Ninety-eight percent of American families are reported to have at least one television set in their homes. The few who choose not to have television report in surveys that their families are closer and read more than other families, take more walks, spend more time on arts and crafts, and talk to one another more often and more constructively. Most parents feel, however, that with reasonable control over the amount of time spent before the set and the kinds of programs allowed, the entertainment and educational opportunities television affords make it an enhancement to family life.

Where not to put your television.

- NEVER in a child's room, except when the child is ill and must stay in bed.
- NOT near the dining-room table—it will kill your dinnertime conversation.
- NOT in the room where people usually read or play games.

How much?

- Schedule the number of hours of TV you want to permit, and enforce your schedule, except in rare cases. One poll turned up the fact that grade school kids watch television an average of more than twenty hours a week. Some educators feel that ten hours is more than enough.
- Ask for evidence that kids are not watching too much TV: books read, new skills learned, projects completed. You may wish to adjust televi-

sion time accordingly.

- Check your child's mood shifts, changes of personality, and level of irritability after a period of TV watching. Kids can become confused with too much stimulation. Also watch for eyestrain and headaches.

- Set family priorities: homework, exercise, shared activities, bedtime. Fit in television watching as it best suits your life-style.

- Be selective about even "good" programs. Too much of *anything* is too much.

- "Don't deprive a child of TV as a punishment or use it as a reward," say some experts. Not all parents agree. Some allow extra TV time for doing extra chores, reading, practicing music, or getting good grades. And some take away time for infractions of house rules or subtract small sums from allowances as "payment" for extra viewing hours.

- Keep puzzles, games, art materials and building toys near the set. The kids may become involved and cut down even on time allowed.

- Be aware that a black-and-white portable set will be less appealing than a big one with color and thus may be watched less.

- Limit TV time without actually saying no by using a plug lock or by removing knobs or antenna.

What programs?

- Review the TV schedule weekly together and select programs family members will watch alone and together.

- Let each child circle, with a different colored marker, one program he or she wishes to watch each day. Al-

Illustrated by Robert Grossman

ternate choices if there are conflicts.

- Urge selection of documentaries, music, and classic stories, but remember that kids can learn a great deal from other kinds of programs—good sportsmanship, for example, from sports broadcasts (which may sometimes teach what *not* to do).

- Help your child categorize the kinds of programs he or she watches: cartoons, family shows, sports, situation comedies, news, and information—and try to broaden the spectrum.

- Cross off forbidden shows in the schedule, but censor sparingly in order to avoid the forbidden-fruit syndrome.

- Turn off the set when there's an argument about a program.

- Set little tasks to go along with TV watching. For example, ask your child to rank shows he or she watches alone on a scale of 1 to 5, and to explain the decisions to you.

- Or have your child keep a TV log and write down a certain number of unfamiliar words heard or seen each week, then look them up or talk to you about them.

Watching TV together.

- Share some viewing time with the kids (their shows as well as yours). Some experts say children should spend no more than half their TV time alone.

- Express your disapproval of characters' behavior, of specific actions, or of a whole program, and explain your reasons.

- Make your comments general, to your spouse or to all the watchers, when older children who dislike being "lectured" are present.

- Watch your child as he or she watches a show to catch signs of fear, overexcitement, or admiration of something of which you disapprove.

- Spend more time with your child after the show, talking it over. "Let the child initiate the conversation," some say, but others believe you should start the talk by asking questions about characters or events the child liked or disliked.

- Talk about the differences between real life and make-believe, about violence and how it could be avoided, about ads for food and toys and how they can mislead.

- Point out the differences between television and newspaper ap-

proaches—that in television news programs stories often start on a low note and build toward a climax, while in newspapers the climax is presented in the lead and the details follow, and that newspapers are able to present more stories and different kinds of stories not suitable for TV.

- Combat sexism by watching, with your child, for examples of women who are competent in a variety of jobs and who are portrayed as individuals, not stereotypes. Watch, also, for characters who care about others and people from other cultural and ethnic groups.

Conversation starters.

- "That looks like fun, as long as you realize it couldn't really happen."

- "I think they could have talked it over instead of fighting."

- "How much sugar do you suppose is in that cereal?"

- "Could you do anything with that toy besides just looking at it?"

- "Did you notice how they built up the suspense in that news story, not telling us how things came out until the end? In newspaper stories,

they usually tell us the end first, then fill in the details."

- "I admire that lawyer. Lots of women are getting into law school these days, I hear."

- "Would you like to do that woman's job? It seems to take a lot of strength."

- "I like the way that character seems to really care about the others. So many times people seem to care only about themselves."

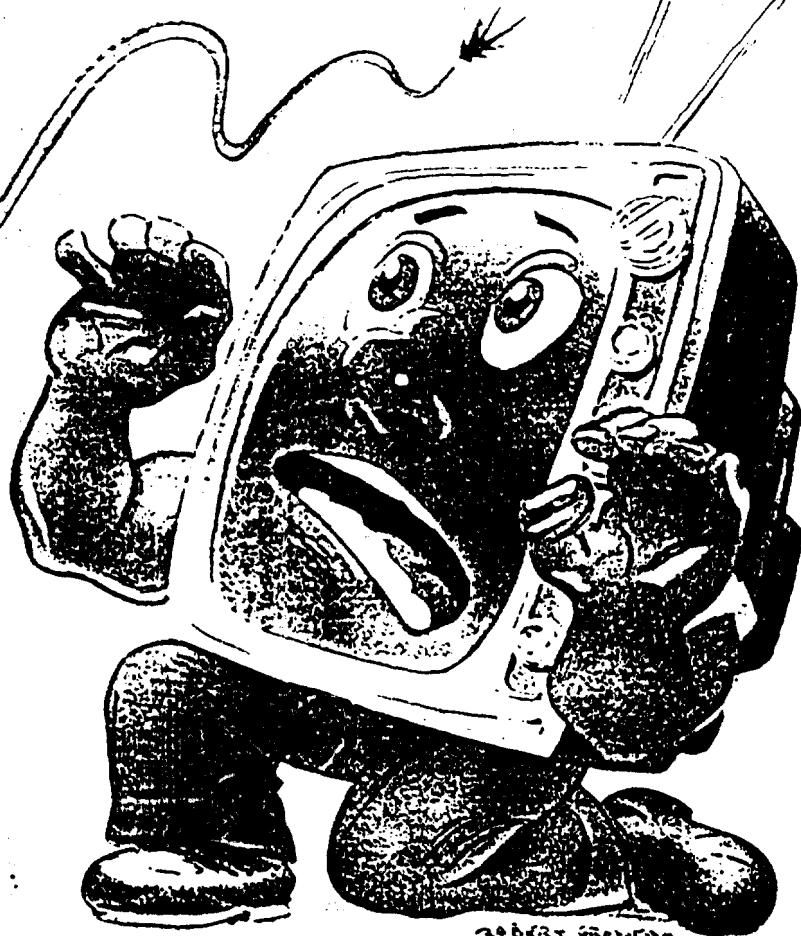
- "It's interesting to see how being brought up in a different country makes a person look at things in different ways."

- "Did you know people wore clothes like that in India? Do you suppose they're cooler than our clothes?"

- "Do you think that's the way old people (or secretaries, or detectives, or doctors) really act or feel?"

- "Is that a real audience laughing or just a laugh track, to let us know what we're supposed to think is funny?"

Vicki Lansky is the author of the forthcoming "Vicki Lansky's Practical Parenting Tips: For Parents of School-Age Kids" (Meadowbrook), from which this article is excerpted.



TV IS VERY EDUCATIONAL AND ENRICHING

1. Inevitably parents of young children turn their attention to the content of the programs their children watch because they have come to believe that television is an important source of learning. Today's television educated children can spout words and ideas they do not comprehend and "facts" they don't have the experience or knowledge to judge the accuracy of.

A number of studies of children's actual comprehension of television material find that while children clearly enjoy watching particular programs intended for their age group, and may be quite attentive while they watch, their understanding of what is happening on the screen is very small indeed.

One study tested children aged 4, 7, and 10 years for comprehension after viewing a twenty-minute fairy tale of a kind commonly seen on television. Only 20% of the four-year-olds showed that they had understood the story line. The older children's comprehension was far superior. The authors conclude that "preschool children were unable to either remember what they had seen with any fidelity or to interpret accurately why the characters acted as they did."

(from THE PLUG-IN DRUG by Winn)

TV IS VERY EDUCATIONAL AND ENRICHING

2. Television and later school performance

Evidence of a negative relationship between television viewing and school achievement has been accumulating for the last two decades. The more television children view, the lower their school achievement.

From 1972 to 1982, the percentage of students scoring in the 600 - 800 range on the SAT's (the highest scorers), fell steadily, just as the brightest students were increasing their television viewing.

Not only a decline in reading skills has been noted, but also a deterioration in writing skills of American students. Basic verbal learnings usually acquired through reading have been neglected as a result of television watching.

Children expect entertainment in school. Their attitude is if it's boring, you just switch the channel.

Students want the teacher to do all the initiating. They'll go along with the activities the teacher initiates, but if she doesn't initiate, they'll just wait patiently. It's like a kind of withdrawal.

THEY GET BORED AND CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO DO

1. "I view that time of boredom, of "nothing to do," as the pit out of which creative action springs. . . . You got to the bottom of your feelings, you let things slip to their lowest ebb, and then you take charge of your life. Not wanting to stay in that place, you make an act.

Nowadays, however, at the onset of that uncomfortable feeling, kids usually reach for the TV switch. TV blots out both the anxiety and the creativity that might follow."

THE TV by Lappe)

(from WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU TURN OFF

THEY GET BORED AND CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO DO

2. Free Time -- Filled Time

Children need help in gaining access to their inner resources. The primary function of free time in children's lives is to provide the necessary opportunities for reducing their dependence and developing their separate selves.

Free time is time when one is free of certain limitations otherwise imposed upon one's time, when one is able to act on one's own volition, at one's own pace, in one's own way, free from all pressures and demands apart from those one invents.

Television appears to have been instrumental in bringing about the demise of free time in children's lives. Television fills time. While a child is engaged with a program, she is free to do nothing but watch and listen. Her will is nonexistent; her personal needs are irrelevant. She does not think her own thoughts. . . . her mind is being "thought for" by the television program.

(from THE PLUG-IN DRUG by Winn)

ENDANGERED MINDS, by Jane Healy

TV, VIDEO GAMES, AND THE GROWING BRAIN

Good-quality videocassettes for children may enhance cognitive and perhaps even language development if they encourage response from the child and if viewing is mediated by an adult.

In many households, even infants are constantly exposed; programs replace family conversation that builds language and listening skills, reading aloud, and games and activities in which adults show children how to solve problems, talk out future plans, or deal with their own emotions. Many parents who would earnestly like to redirect their family time find the kids so "hooked" on viewing, says Marie Winn, that they "reject all those fine family alternatives"--mainly because watching television is easier. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds watch the most of all.

Cognitive Consequences of TV Viewing

Research clearly shows that better students tend to watch less. Moreover, as viewing goes up, academic achievement scores eventually go down. Two scientists from Leiden University in the Netherlands found that television's negative effects on reading skills were particularly strong for the more advanced abilities needed for higher-level comprehension. Television:

- . displaces leisure reading and thus inhibits the growth of reading skills
- . requires less mental effort than reading
- . may shorten the time children are willing to spend on finding an answer to intellectual problems they are set to solve
- . has particularly negative effects for heavy viewers, socially advantaged children, and intelligent children

Television may have a hypnotic, and possibly neurologically addictive, effect on the brain by changing the frequency of its electrical impulses in ways that block active mental processing.

The "Zombie" Effect

"You raise kids on sweets, they become addicted to sweets. You raise kids on alpha, they get addicted to alpha, just like any hypnotic state," commented one neuropsychologist, himself a member of the TV generation and the father of a young child (who is allowed to watch TV in highly selected quantities). He recognizes that parents in high-stress jobs may crave a soothing dose of alpha for themselves after a hard day's work, but believes this habit is not desirable for immature brains that have not yet firmed up all their connections. "The brain is programmed to repeat the same experience; neurons learn to replicate a pattern, that's how people learn, but we don't realize that what we are really learning is habits. Whenever children are doing something for a lot of the

time, we should ask: Is this a habit we want them to have?" Computerized video games appear to be even more addictive for many children than television.

Mania for Mastery

Video games such as "Nintendo" augment some of the most riveting aspects of television viewing with the built-in reward systems of computer games. Here are the games' secret weapons:

- . feelings of control and mastery by the players
- . exact calibration of the level of difficulty to the player
- . immediate and continual reinforcement
- . escape from the unpredictability of human social/emotional relationships

Mastery leads to a sense of power, which feels especially good to a child in a world where things seem pretty much out of control, and where teachers order children around a lot of the time. Many of the games play directly on this need.

Can these games be educational? Some have suggested that they may be training children in skills which will be needed in the future but for which we don't yet know the uses. Many teachers comment, however, that frequent players have trouble readjusting from the microworld to that of a classroom, which offers much less sensory "saliency," not a whole lot of power, and less individual attention and gratification. Some, of course, suggest that what we really need to do is make school as personally rewarding as the games.

"If we could just convince children that learning to read, and do math would make them powerful, too..." one teacher wistfully suggested.

Although some preliminary research suggests that perceptual-motor (specifically, eye-hand) skills may be improved by the games, there is apparently little transfer to school tasks, including writing. In addition, although the player's attention is, indeed, riveted, there has been no evidence of transfer of attention to other kinds of learning.

Brains That Read vs. Brains That Watch TV

One thing television does is it keeps kids from reading. Reading triggers certain experiences in the brain that just don't happen if you don't read. I think our brains are designed to symbolize and represent information in the way that we call language. If we don't exercise it, we lose it. Television, even "Sesame Street", is not very symbolic. It makes things very tangible and easy to understand, but reading is the kind of exercise that causes the brain to develop differently because it uses that symbolic capability.

--Dr. M. Russell Harter